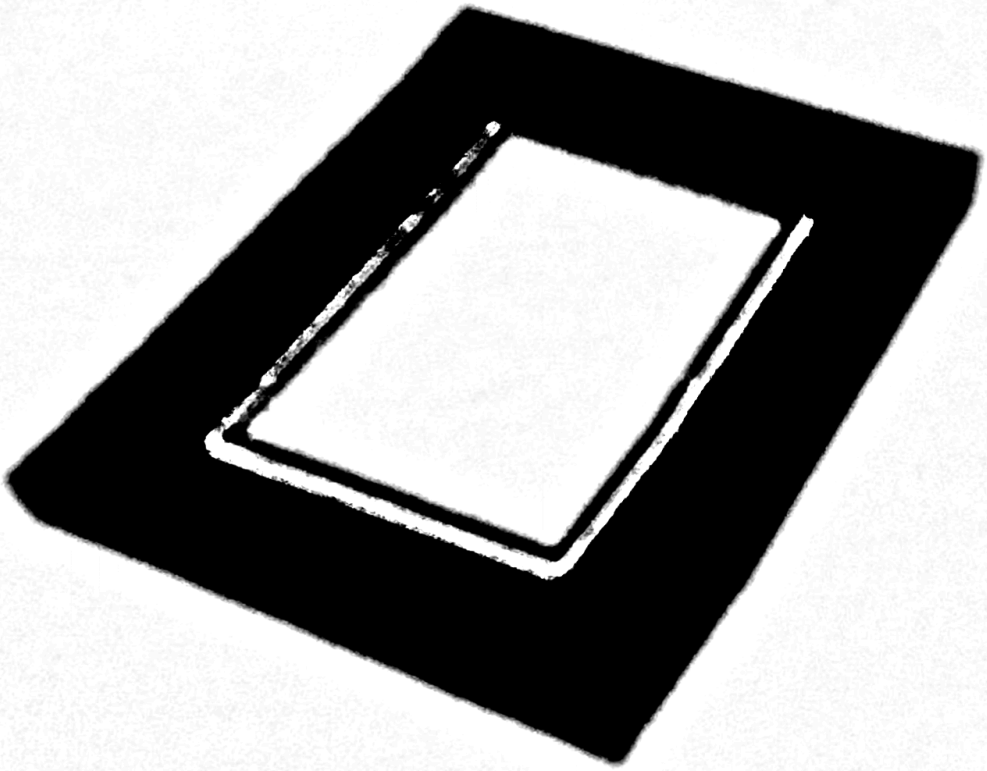
Darkness Of Future Past



New & Selected Short Fiction by

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Encirclement

Garis tossed a grape up in the air, and caught it in his mouth.

"This simply makes no sense," Boris complained. "We have traveled this same path for at least a fortnight, and we still have yet to reach the end."

"Have we been riding in circles?"

Boris shook his head. "Not unless this path circled infinitely upward."

Garis tossed another grape into his mouth.

"Perhaps," he said, "we have somehow ended up in another place entirely?"

"What do you mean?"

Garis paused for a moment, and then spoke again. "Perhaps... Perhaps while we were taking a rest, we were transported to a different mountain entirely. Maybe we find ourselves in Greece, without realizing such."

"Greece?" Boris was laughing now. "Have you lost your senses entirely?"

"Think about it, though," Garis insisted. "What is the tallest mountain in all of Greece?"

Boris perused his thoughts, and finally shook his head. "I must admit, I have never ventured to Greece. What is this grand mountain?"

"Mount Olympus, of course." Garis excitedly popped another grape in his mouth. "A mountain so tall that no-one can ever reach the summit, unless he can fly."

"Now you're being ridiculous."

They rode on in silence for a few minutes. Garis continued eating his grapes at a steady rate. Suddenly, he was struck by a revelation.

"I just realized something!"

"What?"

"These grapes!"

"What about them?"

Garis looked in his bag. "How many grapes did we bring along?"

"Not sure... no more than a bushel, I suppose." Boris was doing his best to ignore Garis.

"And have you not noticed," said Garis, now beaming with excitement, "that we should have run out of grapes several days ago?"

Boris was caught off guard for a moment. "That is odd," he finally admitted.

"And I just glanced in the bag," Garis was nearly shouting, "and yet one grape still remains..."

He handed the pouch to Boris, who looked inside it intensely. Once he was fully satisfied, he handed it back to Garis.

"So," he said, "what do you suppose is going to happen once I eat this final grape?"

Boris looked at him with perplexed amusement. "What, pray tell, do you think will happen?"

Garis was still filled to the brim with excitement. "I think–"

"Wait a moment!" Boris interrupted. "Look." He pointed to a fallen log at the side of the path. "That log, just there."

"What of it?"

"Doesn't it look familiar?"

"No, not really." Garis was impatiently waiting to eat the last grape.

"We sat on that log a few days ago," Boris said, halting his mount, "and ate a couple of apples."

"What?"

"That is the same exact log. I recognize it!"

Garis stopped alongside him, and dismounted. "This log here?"

"Yes!"

"You are absolutely convinced this is the same log? So unique is it, that it could be absolutely no other?"

"I am telling you, it is the same log!"

The two stood there, silently staring.

"Well wait, there is one way to be sure," Boris said at last.

"Yes?"

Boris closed his bag. "When I finished my apple, I threw the core inside the log we were sitting on."

"This log?"

"Maybe."

Garis reached inside the hollow log, and pulled out the core of a green apple. As he held it in his hand, Boris simply stared, astonished.

"But... but..." was all he could say.

"Well, it looks like you might have been right..."

"I am! I am right!"

"...except, there is no possible way this can be your apple..."

Boris stopped abruptly, like a man petrified by Medusa's gaze. "What do you mean? Why not?"

"Because the core of this apple shows no sign of rot."

"What?"

"This core is fresh."

"How? How can it be fresh? I am sure that was my apple, and it has been lying inside of that rotten log for days!"

Something made Garis cringe and clutch his satchel tight against his chest.

"How can it be fresh...? How can it be fresh?!" Boris screamed in a tone of blinded panic.

Garis' mind suddenly went back to the grapes; or grape, as it were... He opened his pouch and peered into it.

Inside were half a dozen green grapes.

Sickman

Cam shuffled slowly along the streets of Grey City, keeping his head down. Though the city was unfamiliar to him, he treated it the same as he would any other place with a lot of people. He avoided them, didn't make a sound, didn't make eye contact. His tattered, dirty cap and wrinkled coat kept people away from him, anyway. They tried to avoid him, as well, which worked in his favor.

The two officers on the street corner saw the dirty, probably homeless, man. Ordinarily, they would have left him alone, but something about the way he walked, avoiding everyone. As though he were hiding something. A vagrancy charge was flimsy, but if he had a weapon, and probable cause or intent... Moore walked up to him, and Otis started the car. They were having a bad day anyway.

The two street cops stopped Cam. He stopped walking, so as not to run into them.

"Excuse me, sir, where are you headed?"

Cam looked down. "Nowhere in particular."

"Do you have somewhere to be?"

"No, Officer. I'm just passing through."

The thinner policeman held out his handcuffs. "Sir, vagrancy is a punishable offense here. If you won't come quietly, we'll have to use force."

At this, the other cop pulled the car up to the curb.

Cam looked nervously at the cops. "Am I under arrest?"

"No, we're just gonna give you a ride out of town."

Cam swallowed, and bit his lip. "All right, Officer. I'll come quietly. Just don't touch me."

Moore looked at him, feigning surprise. "Excuse me?"

"I'll accept your ride, but please, don't touch me," the vagrant said.

Moore grabbed the bum's sleeved arm. "I don't appreciate your tone, *sir*."

The bum pulled away, looking frightened. "Please, Officer. Don't touch me, please," he stammered. His tone was almost pleading now.

Moore motioned for Otis to get out of the car, and grabbed the vagrant's arms, pulling them behind his back. As he tightened the cuffs, he felt a stinging sensation on his fingers. Probably just a bug, the guy's probably crawling with -

Moore looked down at his hands.

Cam closed his eyes shut when the officer took his hands away. "Please, no," he begged, whispering quietly to no one in particular. "Not again."

The cop was clutching his hand, scratching it furiously. Where he had touched Cam's wrist, his skin was developing a rash. The rash quickly spread, and began to flake and come off, exposing his second layer of skin.

As he started to scream, he was cut off by a sudden cough. He coughed again, and again, doubling him over. Finally, he coughed a green, nearly dry substance onto the pavement.

Otis ran to the other side of the car, where Moore was sitting down, leaning against the door. The bum made no motion to get away, but Otis grabbed him just the same.

When he did, he felt sick, and clutched his stomach. He bent over, and vomited pale bile onto the sidewalk. The smell of it made him retch, but there was nothing left to throw up.

Moore was now curled in a ball, shuddering and still coughing up mucus.

Cam looked at the two with horror, but even more terrifying for him was the crowd that had begun to gather. He wriggled his hand out of the cuff that the officer hadn't tightened, and took off running.

The next day's newspaper carried the headline *North Korea in Talks with NATO.* In smaller print underneath were other stories. *New Drug Regulation Passed. Anniversary Parade Announced for City. Club Owner Arrested in Cocaine Bust.*

Finally, in a little box in a corner of the second page, was a single line.

Two Officers Dead From Possible Poisoning.

The Last Note

I had only known him for about a year before he acquired the instrument. He was a polite man, if somewhat distant; it didn't take a psychologist to tell that he never talked to other people if he could help it. Most of his associates joked that he was remarkably normal for a composer.

We met after one of his workshops on "Atimbric Composition" that he gave during his brief visit to the University. I talked with him for a while, and he seemed delighted to have a deep conversation with someone else who shared his view: that music should be written for any instrument (with only minor variations), rather than having to be written separately for every instrument. We became fast friends, and when a minor snafu at home forced him to stay in the city for longer than he had planned, I was happy to share my apartment with him.

Eventually he had to leave, but we promised to stay in touch. Our correspondence consisted of one or two letters a month for about a year, and less frequently after that; we had not spoken for about three months (due to circumstances, rather than any kind of falling-out) when I made a surprise visit to his penthouse suite in Albany. Even though I had only intended to stay a week, he insisted I remain for at least a month to help him keep track of his appointments.

So I became an ersatz live-in secretary during this time; and it was during this period when I returned from an errand to find an old, badly weathered harpsichord in the den. He was so excited about it, like a child with a new toy. I inspected the instrument as he told me about his finding it in an antique shop, and the owner practically giving it away. It was easy to see why - not only was the ancient finish almost completely stripped away, but the strings were so poor that you weren't guaranteed to get the same note if you pressed the same key twice in succession.

Nevertheless, he was convinced that he could fix it up, given enough time. By the time I left Albany to return home, he had indeed made some progress in that regard. As I was leaving, I peeked through the window to where he sat idly tapping the yellowed keys; even with my limited field of view through the small window, I could virtually see a music staff being filled in his imagination.

In the intervening months, I sent one or two letters, but received no reply. When I wrote a third, asking if something was wrong, a reply did come (albeit later than I would have liked). He apologized for not responding sooner, explaining that he had taken his allotted vacation time from New York State University to write. The harpsichord was now beautifully restored, and he had included a photograph with the letter; it looked like a

museum piece, and from his words I got the impression that it played at least as well as it looked.

In the body of the letter, he told me that he was busy working on a piece that would cement not only his reputation as a composer, but completely vindicate his theories of atimbric music. He was, he proudly proclaimed (though he used not one exclamation point, I nonetheless felt an excited shout in the words), going to be the first man in over a hundred years to compose and perform an orchestral piece entirely on the harpsichord. With this, he would prove that the piano's replacement of the harpsichord as the standard for classical pedagogy was entirely due to chance, rather than the former being of inherently superior design.

I was surprised, but wrote him a somewhat shorter reply wishing him the best of luck. For the next month, I was too wrapped up in my own affairs to think much of the reply that I didn't receive. It wasn't until I got a telephone call from Albany that brought my friend the composer back to the forefront of my mind.

The call was not from him, but from his landlady. She was very concerned about him; she said that she hadn't seen him leave his suite for at least a week. The door to his den was locked, evidently with a key different than the one that secured his front door (as the landlady's key did not fit this lock). She saw one of

my letters to him on the counter in the kitchen, and decided to get in touch with me.

I told her that I would come over as soon as I had the time, despite knowing that my schedule was very busy for the next week. In the end, I had to make time; I began the drive to Albany two days after the landlady's call, but didn't arrive until late the next night due to a large wrecked truck slowing down traffic. When I arrived, the landlady was there; I asked her to wait a few minutes while I tried to talk to him.

Walking up to the door of my friend's den, I heard the faint sounds of the harpsichord's strings being plucked softly. The sound, even being devoid of apparent melody or rhythm, was beautiful; in other circumstances, I feel that I might have simply stayed and listened to the music for hours on end. I knocked on the door, identifying myself and asking if everything was all right. I heard no response, only the continued playing of the harpsichord.

Suddenly, I felt that he might be seriously ill; why else would he be unable (or unwilling) to respond to the voice of one of his closest friends? I spoke a bit louder, telling him that I would come in if he didn't respond.

I waited. Silence.

I shouted that I was coming in, and pushed my shoulder against the door. To my surprise, the lock gave way with only a

slight squeaking of rusted metal on wood. When I saw him, my jaw fell slack.

He was lying on the floor, surrounded by pencils, pens, and what must have been hundreds of crumpled sheets of paper. His shirt was dirty and smudged, his hair disheveled; it was obvious he hadn't bathed in days. I couldn't see his face, but he was entirely motionless except for his left hand, which was reaching up and feebly tapping the keys of the harpsichord, apparently at random. How this possibly somnambulistic action still managed to evoke beautiful sounds, I cannot say.

I bent down, and carefully turned him over. His face and neck were gaunt and pale, making it even more obvious that he had gone days, if not longer, without any food. One eye was closed; the other, half-open, stared unblinking at the instrument of his torture. I whispered his name, and suddenly both eyes were wide open. Bloodshot and yellowed, they stared at me with something resembling desperate panic.

There was a shuffling sound, and he held out to me in his right hand a stack of rumpled, ink-stained sheet music. He mouthed a word repeatedly, but I couldn't hear him. I asked him what happened, and he abruptly grabbed me with his left hand and stared at me, piercing my eyes with his manic gaze. As soon as I took the music from him, his eyes rolled back into his head, and he fell slack in my arms. I called out to his landlady to fetch an

ambulance; as she scurried out of the room to do so, I slipped the sheets into my coat.

I can scarcely remember what happened next, but the last I heard from the hospital he was in intensive care, in a coma, with a feeding tube in his arm. Though I considered telling someone about the music he wrote, I have decided not to for the present; something makes me feel that he entrusted it to me. If he ever wakes up, he can decide for himself.

On the subject of this possibly fatal composition, I am reluctant to go into detail. I have not played any of it aloud, on any instrument. Looking at the last page, there is a short phrase that is evidently missing the final note; I assume that his seemingly random tapping on the harpsichord keys was aimed at finding it. If he ever did find it, he didn't get a chance to write it down before he lapsed into his coma.

Will I try to find it - the end of the phrase - the last note?

I am honestly too frightened of what might happen to me if I try.

It's in the Back

"Let me check, sir..." The guy behind the counter at WorldTronics tapped a few keys on the old terminal in front of him. Jeremy waited as the computer processed the salesman's request.

"Well, it looks like we have at least one in stock. Are you sure you didn't see it on the shelf?"

"No, I didn't see any," Jeremy replied. "Do you think it might have been misplaced?"

The salesman thought for a moment. "Maybe. Tell you what. Go see Aaron, the manager. He'll help you. There might be one in the back somewhere."

Jeremy smiled at the red-haired employee. "Thank you."

Jeremy walked up to the sole blue-shirted man, who was just finishing a discussion with another customer. The color of his shirt stood in stark contrast to the gray ones worn by the other associates, signifying his status as a manager.

"Excuse me, sir. Are you the manager?" Jeremy thought it best to be polite.

"Ah, yes, I am," said the black-haired man, and shook Jeremy's hand. "My name is Aaron. How can I help you today?"

"One of the, uh, associates told me to get you. I was looking for a TV tuner, and he said you might have one in the back?"

Aaron cleared his throat. "Yeah, I believe we do. Come this way, please."

"Through this door here," Aaron said, leading Jeremy through an oddly solid steel door marked with the words *Employees Only*. The hallway's shiny, white walls stood in stark contrast to the gray and blue paint job of the main drag of WorldTronics. Another door opened to a room filled with bustling technicians wearing safety goggles and hair nets. Many were bent over lab tables, working on this, adjusting that.

Jeremy was astounded. One tech was soldering a polyhedral globe to some kind of machine that vaguely resembled an engine. Another was waving a small device with a keypad and lights over what looked like a gnarled tree, bearing silver spheres as fruit.

"What on Earth - "

Aaron laughed. "Nothing on Earth, that's what. At least, not much. This way, please."

Jeremy allowed the manager to lead him to another door.

In this room were shelves, stacked to heights higher than Jeremy could comprehend. As he thought that they couldn't possibly fit all of this into a three-story building, he remembered the elevator that had brought them down several stories, and that the floors in the hallways all gently sloped downwards.

Aaron directed Jeremy, still dumbfounded by all that he had seen, onto a huge scissor lift, and pressed a lever that started moving them upwards.

"You see, WorldTronics is the retail aspect of World TechComTronic LLC," Aaron shouted over the lift's whirring. "The one here in Port Locke is also one of the R&D spots."

All Jeremy could do was nod.

"We're way ahead of the curve. We have stuff that won't be released widely for another seven or eight years. Smart phones, wireless fidelity, tablet PCs, you name it. Or not. After all, you can't yet."

Jeremy finally came to his senses. "How do you keep all of this a secret?"

Aaron tilted his head quizzically, and then seemed to comprehend. "Oh, right. Well, we give our employees good pay and good compensation. Once in a while, someone smuggles something out. You remember the Macintosh about twelve years ago?"

Jeremy affirmed this.

"That was one of our pet projects. We'd been working on it since '79. Oh, here we are."

The lift came to a complete stop in front of several rows of boxed parts.

"You said you needed a TV tuner. NTSC, right?"

"What?"

"Did you buy your system in America?"

Jeremy nodded. "Yeah."

Aaron smiled broadly. "Good deal." He pulled the lever in the opposite direction, and the lift descended quickly. They got off at the bottom, and Aaron led Jeremy to another steel door, this one marked *Telepad Room - No Liquids*. They went through.

In this room were several plexiglass cubicles, each measuring about six feet in all directions. On the floor of each was what looked like a hard plastic mattress, three feet square and five inches thick.

Aaron pointed to a rough mat on the floor. "Please wipe your feet, Jeremy," he said, doing so himself on a nearby mat. Jeremy complied, and then followed Aaron over to one of the cubicles.

"These are telepads. They work like a charm, but they're obscenely expensive, even for us. And as of right now, they're one-way only."

The manager punched a code into a numeric keypad that stood near one of the pads. He directed Jeremy to step onto the pad. A recorded voice droned out safety instructions.

"Please keep your hands and feet inside the boundary. Do not step out of the boundary for any reason. If you need to cancel the teleportation in an emergency, simply press the red button located in the upper right corner of the pad. Do not, under any circumstances, look at or near the diode."

Jeremy looked at Aaron. "Where's the diode?"

Aaron stepped onto the telepad alongside Jeremy. "Up there, but don't - "

Just as Jeremy looked up and saw a lens-like structure, he felt sick, and was blinded by a flash of violet light.

When Jeremy came to, he saw Aaron pressing his hand over Jeremy's left eye.

"You alright there, man?"

Jeremy felt extremely disoriented. "What happened?" He tasted bile in his mouth.

"You looked at the diode just as it projected the beam. It went right into your left eye, and you'll probably be blind in that one for at least a week. Keep that patch on it."

"I blacked out?"

"The teleportation process is strenuous, especially for your first time. Plus, you looked right into the diode, so the combined stress was too much. You threw up; probably want to rinse out your mouth."

"Where am I?" The walls were a light bluish-green.

"Our nurse's office," Aaron told him. "Rinse out, get yourself cleaned up, and then go down the south hallway. That'll bring you back out to the checkout counter." He handed Jeremy the box he had originally come in to get. "Here's your TV tuner."

Jeremy looked at Aaron with a confused expression on his face. "Don't you have to erase my memory or something?"

Aaron laughed. "No, no need for that. You know we do some crazy stuff, but you're not sure what or how. We're not doing anything illegal, and we're not aliens. Tell whoever you like. Hell, give 'em the key to the door if you want."

Jeremy got up, and left, going the way that Aaron had shown him.

The gray-shirted man behind the counter took the TV tuner from Jeremy and scanned it. "Find everything you need today, sir?"

Jeremy could only nod silently.

"That'll be eight ninety-five." Jeremy handed the clerk a ten-dollar bill, and took his change. He put the box in a plastic

bag, and handed it to Jeremy along with his receipt. "Have a great day, sir."

"...Thank you."

In the Jungle...

The tree stood alone in the middle of a forest. It wasn't alone in being a tall woody plant with green leaves and hundreds of branches spreading out in all directions, but it was the only one quite like itself in a group of about four dozen. The leaves shook slightly, and a huge seed pod fell from the top, hitting the ground with a loud crack as it split open.

Not too far behind the seed pod was a woman, dressed in a tattered, dirty jade blouse and equally dirty capri shorts. Her shoes were long gone, and scratches covered her feet - lengthening and multiplying as the sharp bark of the tree sliced into her skin. After painfully sliding down the tree, she hopped down to the forest floor, limping over to where the seed pod had landed.

She and the others had been out here for several weeks, at least. There was plenty of food, and a river they had found seemed to be full of drinkable (if slightly muddy) water. But the environment had taken its toll, laying Jonas up in one of their makeshift tents with some kind of fever. He was still lucid enough to move his arms, when his turn came, but she knew that they would all remain trapped here if they didn't reach their goal soon.

That hardly mattered now, she realized. It was her turn, and Miller's after hers, followed by Gina; Jonas might not have to

go again for a few days. She thought back to the board, lost three days ago, but apparently not destroyed: she or Miller might be able to finish if they were exceptionally lucky. Picking up the two halves of the seed pod, she headed back toward the tents.

"Found some more seeds!" she shouted. Miller ducked out of one of the tents; one of his sleeves was now missing, revealing the line where it had previously protected his shoulder from sunburn.

"You ready, Robin?" he asked, setting the seed pod on a nearby rock.

She nodded. "Spot me."

Miller brought over half of a coconut shell, covered in notches. It was half full of dark water, colored by the ink from a pen that Jonas had kept in his pocket. Now that the board was gone, it was the only warning they had as to what might come next. He set it down on the flat rock, carefully positioning it so that it wouldn't tip over.

Robin sighed, and pulled the crude deerskin pouch from her pocket. She turned it upside down, and gingerly shook it. Two old, heavily-scratched dice - carved from ivory, but otherwise indistinguishable from the everyday white cubes - fell out into her hand, which she quickly closed around them. She cupped her hands together, and shook the dice rapidly, careful not to let one

of them slip through her fingers. Please, please, please, she thought to herself. Considering how close they were to the end of this ordeal, she was tempted to cheat... but remembering what was happening to Gina dissuaded her from that course of action immediately.

At last, she opened her hands and tipped them over. The dice fell onto the flat surface of the rock, clattering and bouncing until at last they came to a stop. The first was showing six dots; the second only showed five.

She silently cursed her luck - so close to what she needed! - but quickly turned her attention to the pool of black water. The liquid swirled around, and faint letters began to appear, soon forming themselves into words. Both Robin and Miller peered closely as them, and read:

Don't stop the game,

You realise,

Or one of you

Will vaporise.

She looked up at Miller, whose eyes were wide, and his face pale. He stumbled over his words in a hurry. "G-give me the dice, quick!"

He didn't have to tell her twice; she scooped them up off the rock and handed them to him. He started shaking the dice himself, but stopped as a low rumbling sounded from the trees around them.

"Miller, what was that?" Robin looked around frantically, finally spotting a pair of glowing eyes in the shade.

She had barely started to process what was about to happen when a yellow shape rushed toward them, snarling, the smell of rotten meat coming towards them at a terrifying speed. Miller broke and ran to the left, Robin to the right, neither stopping to look back. As the roaring grew fainter, Robin looked back, just in time to see the beast jump onto Miller's back, forcing a terrified, pained shriek from his mouth. The foliage seemed to swallow them up as the lion took him down, and Robin could hear a snapping sound as Miller screamed again.

As she continued to flee, more slowly now, she had a horrible realization.

Miller had the dice.

Robin didn't dare go back until it was dark, and the full moon hung over her head, barely visible through the canopy. Every step back towards the tents made her more anxious, her heart racing faster and faster. Each twig she stepped on nearly

made her scream in terror, but she pressed forward. She had to make sure Miller was okay.

And that he still had the dice, she thought grimly.

When she came to where he was lying, she nearly vomited from the sight. He was covered in blood, and a huge gash ran from his shoulder blade to his waist. In his outstretched arm, his hand was still firmly clutching something. She approached carefully, trying not to step in any of the blood that was pooled around his body.

"...Miller?"

To her surprise, a low groan emitted from the prone figure. "Th-the dice..."

"Miller, it's okay. I'll go find Gina."

Miller made his best effort to shake his head, groaning with the effort. "No... Lost one..."

Her blood ran cold. "What?"

Slowly, he opened his hand. In it was a single die. He tipped it onto the forest floor, gave a pained grunt, and then exhaled and stopped moving completely. It came up as a four.

Robin wanted to cry, but she knew that she didn't have time. He had dropped one of the dice, probably when the lion was chasing him. Without the board or the cup of dark water, she had no way of knowing whether it had landed solidly, with a side facing up. In any case, he wouldn't be rolling again.

She took up the die, noticing something unusual on her hand. Looking closely, she saw some kind of white mist trailing off from her fingertips. After a moment, she realized that they were getting shorter and shorter.

We stopped the game. The thought sprang to mind unbidden, sending a chill through her entire body. She immediately started backtracking, looking for the other die on the crude path on which the big cat had pursued its human prey.

After a few terrifying minutes - during which she realized that both of her hands, as well as her toes, had started to dissolve into the white mist - she finally found the other die under a spiny plant. It sat unevenly on the dirt; the side that was facing up was a six, but she had no way of knowing if it had landed soundly enough to count as a roll. Robin picked it up and started walking back towards the tents.

When she arrived at the flat rock outside the tent, she was relieved to see that the cup was intact. Less reassuring was the fact that her entire body was starting to give off wisps of vapor; she didn't know how much longer she would be able to walk around and carry things.

Robin carefully picked up the cup and brought it inside Jonas' tent, setting them down on the tree stump they had been using as a table. Clearing a space on the surface, she picked up the

remnants of Jonas' pen, and started writing on the stump with a shaking hand.

Gina,

Miller is gone. Don't know if he rolled first, but it was his turn.

I've started to go already.

Maybe it'll let you end all of this. Please hurry. - R

Sighing, she looked at Jonas lying on the bed. Hopefully Gina would arrive soon.

She ducked out of the tent, and laid down on the ground next to it. The soil was cool and slightly damp; she could almost feel herself dissolving and sinking into it. There was no pain, just a comforting numbness that slowly spread over her body.

Before slipping into unconsciousness, she spoke the word - the word that would never be found in any dictionary, in any language, but which would signal the end of the whole mess if it were spoken by the victor. She repeated it softly several times, and then once loudly.

Nothing happened.

As she drifted off, she felt a faint hope that Gina might be the one to say it. Her vision grew dim as she heard the sound of jungle drums getting louder and louder...

"I am *sure* that I heard something."

Alexis shook his head. "And I am sure that you are imagining things. This cave has been abandoned for near eight years."

"By *human* folk, perhaps," Zardo answered. "Who is to say that the fey-folk, or the beast-races, have not taken to lodging in this forsaken place?" He shifted the lantern to his other hand as he rubbed his fingertips against the damp cavern wall. "One could conceivably come across *anything* in these caves..."

"And conceive is *all* you shall do," retorted Alexis. "The stream running through below us is not only salty, but full of rust and plumbum from the old mines above. The whole is totally inhospitable to any vegetable or animal life."

"Still..." Zardo trailed off uneasily.

Alexis clapped Zardo on the shoulder. "Come, medium. The people may have gone, but their relics might yet remain."

"But even if they do, they will certainly not be - " Zardo bumped into Alexis, who had stopped dead in his tracks after rounding a corner. He looked at Alexis, irritated, and then saw what had made his companion stop in the first place. The narrow, cramped cave tunnel opened up ahead into a large rounded

chamber, with stalactites and stalagmites littering the area in pairs. What drew Zardo's attention more readily, however, were the occupants of the room: three human skeletons, brandishing axes, stood staring directly at them.

" - unguarded."

In perfect unison, the animated skeletons raised their axes in a battle-stance and started marching towards the two explorers. Their bones clacked together, grinding back and forth at the joints like millstones; even in the damp air, the skeletons seemed as dry as desert sand. As they got closer, they set their lipless jaws in such a way that they almost appeared to be grinning madly.

"Get behind me!" Alexis shouted. "Use your spell!"

Zardo didn't have to be told twice. As Alexis drew his mother's old longsword from his belt and pointed the tip ahead at the creatures, Zardo reached into the back of his mind for the arcane datum he had put there the previous day. Finding it, he began to chant in the old language, feeling every hair on his body stand on end as he did so. He focused his gaze on the nearest of the three and slowly moved his hands through the air: the left one top to bottom, the right one left to right, with the paths of his gestures crossing at the skeleton's exposed breastbone. With the final syllable, he flung both hands toward the aggressor.

Though the means of delivery was invisible and inaudible, Alexis felt the rush of air as the arcane weapon flew past his head.

It struck its target squarely in the chest, though the only sound was the crack of splintering bone as the creature's torso split from collar-bone to hip, as if it had been chopped through with a phantom axe. The skeleton fell over in three parts and stopped moving.

His invisible weapon spent, Zardo drew his dagger from his belt. Shifting his gaze from one creature to the other, he realized that the tiny piercing blade would be little use against enemies with no hearts to stab or veins to cut.

Nor was he the only one who realized this. Alexis made a jab at one of the skeletons, and the bronze slid smoothly between its empty ribs - right on target, but still a clean miss. He managed to pull his weapon free before the creature brought its axe in a sideways slash toward him; Alexis was able to deflect the blow with the flat of his sword, but only just. In the moment, he realized that the skeleton had almost ignored his failed attack, instead of dodging it or trying to seize his blade while it was caught.

"Zardo!" He waved his blade back and forth, intending to protect against any further attacks rather than deal out his own. "Take the axe!"

Zardo crouched down and nimbly slipped under Alexis' outstretched sword, sprinting with one hand on the cavern floor to reach the broken form of the skeleton that had fallen to his spell. He could barely see this far from his and Alexis' lanterns

(carefully set against the far wall), but he quickly found the huge metal shape of the axe and wrapped his fingers around the shaft. The grinding of bone against bone set his nerves on edge, and he instinctively rolled to the right; just inches away came a crash, a spark, and a brazen ringing as one of the creatures brought its deadly blade down, striking stone.

"Come on!" Zardo ducked behind Alexis and snatched up one of the lanterns, hurrying back around the corner. Alexis slowly backed away, then spun on his heel and followed him at a similar pace - narrowly being missed by another axe-blow as he did so.

In pursuit of their fled targets, the two skeletons began marching forward towards the corner, axes raised perpendicular to the ground, edges forward. As the first rounded the bend, there was a flash of bronze, a blur; and the lime-bleached skull separated from the spine with a snap, sailing across the tunnel with its jaw open as if in surprise. It finally rebounded off of the rock wall with a hollow crack, coming to rest at the feet of the fighting-man who had severed it. Alexis was still in the stance at the end of the swing, gripping the handle of the axe with both hands as his heart beat like a war-drum, when the body of the creature finally collapsed to the floor of the cave.

The second immediately sliced through the air at Alexis, who managed to stop the blow by holding up the shaft of the axe

like a staff. He swung his own blade in response, but the axe-head became lodged in the collarbone of its target. Alexis stepped back and grabbed his longsword from the floor as the skeleton - the heavy axe still protruding from its neck - advanced. He made a few feints, but the creature was undeterred and kept advancing, until it had pressed its living opponent against a concave section of the wall. Alexis gritted his teeth, his mouth curled in what might almost have been a snarl, staring defiantly into the empty eye-sockets of the grinning skull.

With a roar, the fighting-man chopped at the head of the skeleton - it scraped against the bone and was deflected - a glancing blow - the creature brought its weapon down - Alexis cried out and fell, slipping heavily to the stone floor with the feeling that his shoulder had been set on fire.

Suddenly, the creature bucked to one side as Zardo swung his dagger into its skull like a hammer. The sharp point punched through the round shell of bone, and the head twisted around until it broke free from the neck with a sound like a wolf stepping on a dry twig. After the skeleton fell down and stopped moving, the medium stomped down hard on it several times to be sure it stayed down.

A pained groan from Alexis snapped Zardo back to the moment, and he kneeled down next to where his companion was lying. The blood was slowly leaking out from where the axe had

bit into his shoulder; even in the dim light of the lantern, the hot fluid's scarlet hue stood out like a beacon against the dark grey of the cave and the olive shade of Alexis' skin (where the blood had not yet washed over it).

"Are you alive?"

Alexis weakly opened his eyes. He stiffly turned his head, grimacing in pain, and looked at his bloodied shoulder as well as he could. As he drew a shallow breath, Zardo cut open Alexis' tunic with his dagger, and started tearing off some of the cloth, pressing it against the cut to stanch the flow of blood.

The wounded man coughed. "How bad is it?"

"Well..." Zardo carefully lifted the cloth, then replaced it. "I think you should survive. It might be a few hours yet before we can set off again."

A shuffling noise caused both explorers to whip their heads around to face the corner, around which they had encountered the animated skeletons. When no further noise could be heard, they relaxed. Zardo's attention was drawn to the two smashed ones that lay only a few feet from them.

"Alexis."

"Yes?" Alexis was slowly inching toward the wall, so he could sit against it.

"Look at these. At the knees, and elbows." He picked up an arm that had come loose when the creature had fallen. The

forearm and upper arm were held together by several narrow strips of rawhide, tied in an unusual knot; each of the fingers had a single strip threaded from the tip to the wrist. "Joinings."

The veteran frowned, his mind fogged with pain. After a moment, he clicked his fingers and pointed with his good arm. "Someone made them. Someone *built* those... things."

"*Someone* certainly did."

Alexis and Zardo turned their heads toward the new voice. Standing above them was a figure clad in a dark-colored cloak; the shaven head and face were painted to resemble a skull.

No one said a word for several moments. When at last the silence was broken, it was by the painted man.

"You have disrupted my work, and damaged three of my servants. Ordinarily, I would slay you, and take your souls before your blood cooled... but you must have some skill to defeat three with two, and it appears that Blessed Mortus - " he pointed at Alexis' bleeding shoulder " - may soon claim your life personally." The figure stroked his chin with a bony hand. "You have until the count of twelve to leave with your lives."

Zardo started standing up, hesitant.

"One."

He bent down and helped Alexis to his feet, and hurried past the cloaked figure; the man made no effort to stop them, only turned to face them as they clumsily walked away.

"Two."

Zardo accidentally pulled on his companion's wounded arm, and Alexis cried out.

"Three."

They staggered through the cave, trying to retrace their steps.

"Four."

Although they had rounded several bends in the tunnels, the voice of the painted figure still seemed just behind them.

"Five."

The medium *knew* the voice was following them.

"Six."

They came to a junction leading left and straight ahead. Zardo started ahead, but Alexis grabbed him by the collar and pulled him into the left-hand passage.

"Eight."

Eight? What happened to seven?

"Nine."

Daylight! The two explorers hurried around the bend and saw the entrance, less than ten yards ahead of them.

"Ten."

They ran to the mouth of the cave, but standing in their path was the man in the cloak. With the skeletal mask painted

over his features, he appeared to be grinning with two sets of teeth.

"Eleven."

He suddenly staggered and grunted in surprise, and a heavy wooden cudgel fell to the rocky floor. The man spun around, and Zardo saw a woman dressed in a dark green robe, her long hair woven into thick braids.

The man's features twisted with anger. "Dariana."

She raised another wooden club. "Let them pass, Koyaan."

Koyaan didn't turn or move. Seeing him motionless, Zardo gently pulled Alexis by the arm; they quickly and quietly slipped past their aggressor. His eyes followed them until they vanished into the treeline fifteen yards off.

"You should follow them, Dariana, if you would not meet the fate that should be theirs."

The robed woman gave a slight smile. "Your threats are empty, Koyaan. You have no power over me."

She turned on her heel and began walking toward the trees. The painted one watched her go, expressionless save for the narrowing of his eyes. His fingers curled around the grip of a bone-handled dagger... but he slowly turned and re-entered the cave, soon disappearing into the darkness.

* * * *

Alexis was lying on the forest floor, his eyes closed, his breathing shallow. The gash in his shoulder was oozing darker blood, and the skin around it was an alarming purple; Zardo wondered if the axe had been treated with some kind of toxin. The woman in the green robe came closer, furrowing her brow upon seeing the wound.

"When did he receive this injury?"

Zardo bit his lip nervously. "Near ten minutes past. One of those... things hit him with an axe."

As Dariana knelt down to examine Alexis, Zardo saw that her robe was not merely made of green cloth, but was formed from hundreds of leaves that had apparently been sewn together. She studied the festering wound intently, then took a deep breath.

"We must first halt the action of the poison." Dariana began to slowly move her hands over Alexis' prone form, moving from his hands and feet up his limbs to the wound. As she did so, she softly sung in a tongue that was totally unfamiliar to Zardo's ears. It has the shifting vowels he remembered from the language of the elves, but it was also possessed of a musical quality even more pronounced than the native speech of the wee folk. The medium was transfixed, feeling that this beautiful song might

have been the production of the very birds themselves on another plane.

The chant concluded, and Zardo saw that the swelling of the injury had been reduced; the blood bubbled and leaked out, and Dariana dabbed at it with a small ball of wool. She then held her hands over the gash, closed her eyes, and made a shorter incantation in the same musical tongue. When she stopped and removed her hands, the cut was closed and covered in dry blood. Taking up the other end of the piece of wool, she scraped away the scab, revealing the mended flesh beneath.

Zardo was speechless. He had certainly seen phenomena that the ignorant might call miracles, but the idea of magic being used to do *this*...

"Is he alive?"

She smiled. "He was never fully dead, medium. I have merely mended his wounds, to the best of my abilities; the rest must be healed by Time. Here, wake him."

He gently shook Alexis by the arm. "Alexis!"

The veteran opened his eyes halfway. "Did we escape?"

"We did. We're free now." Zardo looked at Dariana with a grateful smile. "And we have this woman to thank; you nearly died by that axe."

Alexis looked at her and gave a military nod. "Thank you, madam. I owe you my life."

He knew there would be no point discussing his misgivings with Alexis. Had they found the treasure they sought, the veteran would have spent his share on a round of drink for the entire barracks (or whoever happened to be in the dining hall that night), a large ham, and one or more harlots; the hours before he took them to bed would be spent arguing with the younger cadets as to the merits of various sizes of swords and shields, and the proper role of archers on the field of battle. He was a fighter, damn it all, and he would earn his way in the world with the family blade at his hip!

Zardo was less sure of his own role. True, the sights they had seen in their short career together were grand on occasion, and the magic ring he had discovered in Randolph's tomb had served him well (until it was stolen from him by a pickpocket). But he was growing weary of the constant brushes with his own mortality, and he still had yet to be noticed by a possible patron who could fund his Art.

Idly, he pulled a large, flat copper coin - half of his entire fortune - from his pocket. He turned it over in his hand; the star on one side, and the coiled serpent on the other, glinted in the light. Zardo considered for a moment, then balanced the coin on his thumbnail. If it came down with the star facing up, he would stay in this line of work with Alexis for a while longer. If the

serpent came up, he would seek patronage directly, degrading as it might be.

The magic-user flicked the copper into the air, watching as it spun end over end, gleaming.

Olive

It is not at all easy to inflict structural failure on a human skull. Though blunt trauma, hairline fractures, and indirect damage from rapid deceleration - to say nothing of the innumerable viruses, unicellular creatures, and cancers that could eat away at the inside - often damaged the brain beyond the body's ability to repair it, it was quite difficult to compromise the casing of the bone and pressurized fluid that surrounded it, without the aid of a mechanical device or a burst of energy. Difficult, but not impossible. For Olive, it was worth the additional effort to break through that barrier, to make sure that the target had been well and truly neutralized.

The contents of the long thermoplastic case would certainly see to that. Most of the additional components that added to the weight of the package - wind gauge, compass, infrared scope module - had been left behind, judged unnecessary. There was no wind in the city as such, only the occasional small fan to circulate the same stale air in a single room; Olive could tell which way was north blindfolded; and the immediate environment surrounding the target would be lit up like a tanning bed, at least until the crucial moment.

Even stripped of the unnecessary components, the case's weight brought contentment to its bearer, a reminder of the

power it would unleash at the opportune time. Olive would always remember the first introduction to that force, when a beetle landing on one sniper's hand had caused a miniscule shift to the west, resulting in the target's eyes being torn out by the round on its errant flight. He had shrieked hideously, blood shooting from his pulped eye sockets like some comic hero's ocular lasers.

Though not one for jokes or humor in general, even Olive had to admit: that was pretty funny.

Bringing more than contentment - one could almost call it comfort - was the piece of alloyed titanium slung from a hip belt, its rubberized grip dry as dust in spite of the muggy steam that clung like sweat to the skin of the city. Chosen by Olive for its smooth blade and pointed tip, the machete had been sharpened to a wicked edge and trained with until it was almost a part of its wielder's body. *Almost*, Olive thought, and nearly shuddered. The gun was a weapon of distance, but the blade was one of closeness, an intimacy that was almost sensual. For others, that intimacy might have been difficult to disentangle from the urges and emotions of sex. Not so for the assassin, who had removed the libido from the psychological "tissues" that surrounded it, in much the same manner as the appendix - working alone, with only minimal anesthetic.

Though appearance was a tertiary concern at best under normal circumstances, it was essential while on mission. The rifle

case could easily be assumed to contain a musical instrument, and Olive's clothing - heavy waterproof boots, and matching cable-knit acrylic hat and jumper - would reinforce the impression. Even after the demise of the staff system, the crowding making all but the smallest acoustics impossible to transport and stage, and the hyperinflation that only exacerbated the astronomical prices of both wood and the vacuum-tubes used in classical synths, the tendency for musicians to dress like *les sans domicile fixées* was one which seemed likely to endure until the heat death of the universe. Nor would going alone to a condemned building be viewed with suspicion for one who likely sought to "commune with the Muse" in any way possible.

Standing in the lift as it sped towards the roof, Olive's right arm felt heavy and slightly numb. Not from the case - that weight was welcome - but from the assembly of surgical steel and ceramic within the limb, which had so far resisted all attempts by the body to reject It, and which even now was literally itching to be let loose, urging Its host to allow It to fulfill Its intended function. Olive had had to learn to ignore that sensation, and now found doing so almost as easy as ignoring the occasional urge to propagate the species; but the consequences of one far exceeded the other in severity. To fuck another human would risk repopulating the city, undoing the labor of years of expertly performed executions. But to unleash It indiscriminately would

play right into the hands of Its maker - and Olive would sooner die than do his bidding again.

The characteristic low-frequency tone (chosen to alert people without setting off their possible sonic frequency sensitivity syndrome) announced that the lift had arrived, and the sole passenger stepped out onto the roof, case in hand. Unlocking the box, removing the components within, and assembling them into a large-bore recoilless sniper weapon nearly five feet long tok less than two minutes. Looking through the polycarbonate lenses of the default optical scope, the assassin could see the South Pleasure Dome three blocks away, and the target's pneumatic limousine just now pulling into the white zone. *Right on schedule.* Olive unfolded the tripod legs of the rifle's stock, and waited silently.

Less than a minute had elapsed before the target emerged from his vehicle, a willowy gynoid on each arm. *Didn't think there were any heteros left in the South Dome,* Olive thought while chambering a round. The distinctive click - and then another noise. Rubber on cement.

There were no words for the brief flicker of anger in Olive's mind. The check around the area upon arriving had been quick, sloppy. Pulling back slightly, the assassin pretended to adjust the rifle scope, catching a glimpse of the intruder in the faint reflection off the lens. Though the blade was within reach,

stopping to dispatch this goon would mean missing the one shot at the target.

Only need one hand to pull the trigger...

One arm squeezed the mechanism, sending nearly two pounds of cobalt and polypropylene hurtling through what might once have been described as Senior Executive J. P. Bachmann's head. The other arm swung the razor-sharp machete through the Tyvek jumpsuit and into the small intestine of an anonymous hitwoman, whose screams were only slightly muffled by the balaclava she wore. Olive knew that she wasn't quite dead, and pulled on the machete; but it stayed where it was, and the steam rising from the wound suggested why. The assassin rapidly dismantled the rifle, locked it in its case, and ran to the lift. Though the rubber polymer on the knife's handle would prevent any fingerprints from remaining, it was a shame to leave behind a damn good weapon.

On the ride down, Olive turned the jumper inside out, revealing a blue flannel in place of the reddish acrylic. After a moment's consideration, the shooter removed the hat and stuffed it in a pocket, revealing a jagged haircut upon a marble-white head. The long facial scar was peeled off and swallowed, and mirrored glasses hid sunken, bloodshot eyes with no eyebrows. With the case slung on backpack straps rather than carried like a

briefcase, the musician vanished and the systems technician emerged from the lift on the ground floor.

Though it was dismaying to have missed the target's dissolution, it shouldn't be hard to find someone who had got it on tape. Olive didn't smile, but the satisfaction of a job well done was there nonetheless.

Afterword

"Encirclement" was written after first experiencing a performance piece (guess which). Far from the finest, but it's my first published work, therefore I'm cautiously proud of it.

"Sickman" wasn't originally written for publication, but I was working for the magazine so I chose something short. Title's from an Alice in Chains song, but the story's much more my own.

"The Last Note" is inspired by a different work, but the original context was comic. By plugging the basic plot into a more appropriate setting, the mood was changed.

"It's In the Back" is actually my *oldest* published story. Originally a world-building exercise, took on a bit of its own life. 1991 could've been clearer, with the Game Gear TV tuner.

"In the Jungle..." explores my fascination with rules that go unexamined in seemingly adventurous settings.

"A Brush with Death" was fun to write (and hopefully, read). It's closer in tone to 1974 than 2014, by design.

"Olive" is a character I hope to use more in the future - no need to even pretend to enjoy human emotion with this one.

About the Author

M. A. McGowan has been writing for some time, and lives in North America with a sheep and a large cat.